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ABSTRACT

In order to examine and understand power relations between international students who speak English as a second language and American students in online discussions in adult and higher education settings, 1002 postings related to discussion topics in two doctoral-level adult education online classes with 45 students 6 of whom were international students were analyzed using critical discourse analysis, and 5 of the international students were subsequently interviewed. The researchers sought to learn in what ways power and privilege are expressed in online discussions and how adult international students interpret the nature of power relations within the context of online discussion. International students' postings indicate that they initiate discussions far less frequently than American students, primarily posting to reply to someone's opinions with sympathetic language that supplements rather than contradicts, and they frequently use powerless language such as disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions. In addition, international students often do not post in online discussions because of the language barrier, including their failure in catching discussion context. The analysis suggests that power inequality is mostly caused by linguistic and cultural context misunderstandings. It is recommended that facilitators of online courses pay more attention to international adult students in order to ensure that their participation is acknowledged, therefore reducing their marginality. (Contains 16 references.) (MO)

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Power Relations within Online Discussion Context: Based on Adult International Students' Perspective and Their Participation in the Learning Context

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine and understand the nature of power relations within online discussion context in terms of international students' perspective. The result of this study reveals that power inequality is mostly caused by linguistic misunderstandings and the misunderstandings of cultural context that exists between international adult students and American students.

Introduction

Power is a key element in all human interactions. Tisdell (1993) points to the structural inequality that exist in society, the "power disparity between racial minorities and the white majority, between the poor and the wealthy, the undereducated and the educated, and women and men" and how "these power relations are reproduced and maintained through the educational process" (p. 203). Cunningham (2000) argues that "much of the field of adult education's rhetoric centers on the learners, as if the learners are disembodied creatures and as if the social context, the social structures, the social class in which we all exist do not affect the process of education" (p. 573). Wilson and Cervero (2001), in citing Livingston, contend that to practically confront the world of inequity, we need to understand the way it is, have a vision for what it should be, and have strategies for achieving our vision. They depict adult education as a site for the struggle for knowledge and power: "In a real sense, the power relations that structure our lives together do not stop at the doors of our classrooms or institutions that provide adult education" (¶ 6). Discussion is usually considered as a powerful tool for the development of pedagogic skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and reflection as well as for the improvement of democratic communication. Based on his experience as a learner or a facilitator in a discussion group, Brookfield (2001) underscores that unless adult educators create a space

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for those voices that would otherwise be excluded by default, discussion reproduces structures of inequity based on race, class, and gender that exist in the wider society.

Although there is a body of literature that covers the types of interaction or the factors influencing interaction in online discussions for adult learners, there is a lack of research that specifically examines the nature of power relations between international students who speak English as a second language and American students in online discussions in adult and higher education settings.

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand the nature of power relations within online discussion context in terms of international students' perspective. This purpose was guided by the following research questions: (1) In what ways are power and privilege expressed in the online discussions between international students who speak English as a second language and American students? (2) How do adult international students interpret the nature of power relations within the context of online discussion?

Literature Review

There are a considerable number of studies describing online discussions or comparing online and face-to-face discussions in adult and higher education. These studies have mostly focused on such subjects as (1) how adult students participate in online discussions, (2) the comparative advantages and disadvantages of online and face-to-face discussions, and (3) the relative merits of various instructional strategies for online discussions. Most of these studies, however, have given little attention to the nature of power relationships and the ways in which power and privilege are manifested in the online discussions between international students who speak English as a second language and American students.

In considering the ways in which discussion mores represent or challenge dominant cultural values, Brookfield (2001) suggested three theoretical perspectives, Marxist structural analysis, resistance theory, and post-structuralism as lenses for a power analysis of classroom discussion. He notes that the discussion facilitator should intervene to prevent the patterns of inequity present in the wider society from reproducing themselves automatically in the classroom.

Tisdell (1993) examined how power relationships predominantly based on gender but including race, class, and age were manifested in higher education classroom of adult students

through observations of classes taught by a male and a female professor, interviews, and document analysis. She observed several significant facts in terms of power relations: (1) the students who benefited from more interlocking systems of structural privilege tended to have more power in the classroom from the perspective of their peers than the students who had less interlocking privilege and they played the dominant role in the class, (2) the students contributed to reproducing structured power relations in their reification of patriarchal values, (3) the male professor tended to exert more control than the female professor, and (4) the middle-aged women with more education tend to be more participatory, at least in classes where affective forms of knowledge are valued.

Grob, Meyers, and Schuh (1997) examined sex differences in power/powerless language such as interruptions, disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions in the small group context of a higher education classroom by juxtaposing two competing theoretical frameworks: "dual cultures" and "gender similarities." Their findings revealed that there were no significant differences between women and men in their use of interruptions, hedges, and tag questions, which supports "gender similarities" approach to understanding sex differences and not the dominant "dual cultures" approach for investigating sex differences. In other words, there was no evidence that men used more powerful language while women used powerless language.

McAllister and Ting (2001) explored gender differences in computer-mediated communication in web-based college courses, by analyzing the 456 discussion postings of 34 students in two online college courses. Each discussion posting was analyzed for seven variables: frequency, length, readability, audience, purpose, reference, and format. The findings of the study suggested that male and female discussion items differed significantly in length, use of indicators to specify a particular reader, purpose, and use of formal signature. However, male and female discussion items did not differ in frequency, readability, intended audience, or references to personal experience or outside sources.

Although all of this literature contributes to our understanding of power in online learning, it is clear that additional work is needed if we are to understand power dynamics in this rapidly growing educational format. This study explored the ways in which power and privilege are expressed between international students who speak English as a second language and American students in the online discussions in adult and higher education.

Methodology

This study explored the extent to which the structural power inequities that exist in society are reproduced in an online classroom of adult graduate students; the study focuses primarily on power relationships between international students who speak English as a second language and American students. In this study, we used critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a research methodology. CDA can be used to identify and map power relationships in educational settings. Pratt and Nesbit (2000) argue that discourses are systems of thought based on language in the social sciences; hence, "attention is drawn not only to vocabularies of speech or writing but also to how they imply a whole network of social relationships and regularities" (p. 118). In addition, they point out that the sociocultural discourse, which posits that learning is inescapably based on contextualized social relations, precipitates questions about patterns of social relations, power, and particularities of circumstance and settings" (p. 122). CDA is "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (van Dijk, 1998, ¶ 1). Furthermore, van Dijk asserts that effective research using CDA has four key characteristics: (1) It focuses primarily on social problems and political issues, rather than on current paradigms and fashions; (2) it employs a multidisciplinary approach to understanding social problems; (3) rather than merely describe discourse structures, it tries to explain them in terms of properties of social interaction and especially social structure; and (4) it focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce or challenge relations of power and dominance in society.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997, pp. 271-280) summarize the primary tenets of CDA: (1) CDA addresses social problems, (2) power relations are discursive, (3) discourse constitutes society and culture, (4) discourse does ideological work, (5) discourse is historical, (6) the link between text and society is mediated, (7) discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory, and (8) discourse is a form of social action. CDA focuses on the role of discursive activity in constituting and sustaining unequal power relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). In a similar vein, van Dijk (1996) articulates the elucidation of the relationships between discourse and social power as one of the crucial tasks of CDA. In short, he maintains that CDA "should describe and explain how power abuse is enacted, reproduced or legitimised by the text and talk of dominant groups or institutions" (p. 84).

Dellinger (1995) says that socially situated speakers and writers produce texts and the relations of participants in producing texts are not always equal; there will be a range from complete solidarity to complete inequality. He stresses that meanings arise through interaction between readers and receivers, and in most interactions, users of language bring with them different dispositions toward language, which are closely related to social positionings.

Research Participants and Data Collection

The two online classes, "T" and "G", selected for this study were doctoral level classes related to adult education at a large state university in the south. The same instructor taught these two online classes offered in the summer session of 2002. Students enrolled were graduate students, five males and forty females between the ages of twenty-three and fifty-eight. Of them, six were international students, three males and three females, from Asian countries. The two online courses contained nine units each and employed a mix of a large group discussion and small group discussions in each of the learning units. More specifically, for each learning unit the instructor gave discussion questions, set a discussion task, and facilitated the discussion. For class G, each member of the class was required to make at least three more substantive contributions to the discussion of each unit. In contrast, for class T, there was not any special requirement for the discussion participation of learners.

In this study, all of 1002 postings related to the discussion topics were analyzed based on CDA. The analysis focused specifically on the postings of the international students. In addition, we interviewed five international students with a phenomenological interview method in order to identify and understand their experiences; how they experience power relations within the online discussions and how they interpret their experiences. These students represented a variety of ages, gender, educational backgrounds, workplace roles, and societal and cultural experiences. Data was collected through taped interviews, lasting from one to two hours. Through the use of the constant comparative method as presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967), key categories and themes were identified.

Data Analysis

In this study, discussion postings were analyzed based on techniques of CDA, closely keeping in mind the primary tenets of CDA. As Fairclough (as cited in Joyce, 2001) notes that "there is no set procedure for doing discourse analysis; people approach it in different ways according to the specific nature of the project, as well as their own views of discourse" (¶ 17).

Van Dijk (1993) also points, "Critical discourse analysis is far from easy. . . . It requires true multidisciplinarity, and an account of intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture" (p. 253). Joyce (2001) stresses, by taking a position, researchers must be self-reflexive in terms of their interpretations and analyses and maintain some distance in order to avoid producing analyses that map directly onto their own personal beliefs. In this study, our analysis was based on indicators of power/powerlessness drawn from studies by Grob, Meyers, and Schuh (1997), McAllister and Ting (2001), and Tisdell (1993) to identify and analysis power relations among participants. These indicators contain discussion initiatives, disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions. In addition, to analyze transcripts of interviews, the researcher followed the conversation analysis (CA) method as presented by Silverman (1998). Silverman presents the following principles for CA: "Always try to identify sequences of related talk, try to examine how speakers take on certain roles or identities through their talk, and look for particular outcomes in the talk and work backwards to trace the trajectory through which a particular outcome was produced" (p. 151).

Findings

Much less Discussion Initiatives and the Use of Powerless Language

The discussion initiative and the use of powerless language are regarded as critical factors to judge power inequality. The result of analysis of international students' postings indicates that they have much less discussion initiatives than American students as well as use more frequently powerless language. Major part of their postings was replied postings to someone's opinions. Even in cases where they had discussion initiatives, only a few students replied.

In addition, they usually use powerless language such as disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions. Here are data to support this finding:

> *...Using the word, the laissez-faire, in my answer is clearly my fault. It was too much exaggerated. I am sorry about that. In the future I will be more careful in using a concept or word. Thank you again. (Soonam, Man, Class G)*

> *... I think he is the most underprivileged and weakest individual. I think failing experiences from formal school system, starting learning in the middle age, and being a*

blue-collar worker hindered him from learning more than his being a white man. (Jemi, Woman, T)

I feel many public organizations suggest just a vague idea to employees. What do you guys think of it? Any idea of yours is welcome. (Yewon, Woman, Class G)

Lurking in Silence

Similar to speaking English, writing English is the main difficulty international students face when participating in online learning. The participants agreed that one of main reasons international students do not actively participate in online discussions is due to the language barrier. Jeris, a third year doctoral student, described her experience with participating in online learning:

I feel reluctant to take active learning within an online learning session like a WebCT class. Unsurprisingly, the primary resistance that prevents me from fully participating in the online learning class is because of my insufficient English as an international student. As an ESLer, it takes a lot of efforts in terms of reading Americans' postings in the online learning class especially when there is a popular topic spreading on the bulletin board. American students they can keep responding to peer's opinion at the same time adding their own comments to the message board. It is difficult to catch up the speed of their writings on WebCT. It's a form of unbalanced dynamics while I was spending so much time on reading rather than responding my own comments due to the language barrier.

Another important reason why adult international students do not actively participate in online discussions is owing to the failure in catching discussion context. Although online discussions among adult learners seem to be relatively free of power disparity, power inequality between the adult international students and the American students is salient, which is caused by the international students' lack of understanding of the American society and culture. An example of this comes from Soonam, a second year master student, who commented on his experiences of becoming marginalized:

Even if I posted actively my opinions on the bulletin boards and replied to other students' postings, I often felt they ignored me. Probably, I was in the very different context of discussion. I mean my opinions couldn't obtain their sympathy. In a word, I was just saying my own experiences in a very specific context they never imagined.

Sometime, situations like the above occurred in the discussion process:

I like your idea about tax issue. I have never thought about that before because the tax system of the U.S. is totally new to me. Thank you. (Boram, Man, Class G)

The adult international students' passive participation in the online discussion can be explained by the reasons suggested above. Out of six international students, only one posted his opinions over the class requirement.

Excessive Sympathy

Interesting enough, when international students replied to American classmates' opinions, they begin with sympathetic words typically. Accordingly, their replied postings are likely to contain supplementary opinions rather than contradictory ones to the target postings. This characteristic seems like a critical sign of power inequality between international students and American students. Here are data to support this finding:

Thank you very much for your acute comment. I absolutely agree with your comment ("The remainder of your answer to the question seems a very good example of democratic but not laissez-faire leadership"). (Soonam, Man, Class G)

Hi Everyone. I really enjoy your definitions and experiences about management. I found that most concepts defined by you are based on the diverse works which managers should do to achieve organizational goals or objectives. I fully agree with your opinions. I would like to add some points in terms of my experiences. (Soonam, Man, Class G)

Mary, I agree with the idea the new CEO should present a solid, strong, and consistent vision. (Soyoung, Women, Class G)

That is good point. I agree with you basically. (Kathy, Woman, Class T)

Conclusion

The result of this study reveals that power inequality is mostly caused by linguistic misunderstandings and the misunderstandings of cultural context that exists between international adult students and American students. As mentioned earlier, unless adult educators create a space for those voices that would otherwise be excluded by default, discussion reproduces structures of inequity based on race, class, and gender existing in the wider society (Brookfield, 2001). Brookfield (2001) notes:

> The adult discussion leader cannot be a laissez-faire facilitator, exercising a minimum of control. Taking this stance only serves to allow patterns of inequity present in the wider society to reproduce themselves automatically in the classroom. Instead, the teacher must intervene to introduce a variety of practices to insure some sort of equity of participation. (pp. 221-22)

Adult education is "a site for the struggle for knowledge and power" (Cervero & Wilson, 2001, ¶ 8). At this point the burning problem is to disclose and change the unequal power relations between people who have the privilege and those who do not. Accordingly, adult educators should pay attention to power inequality that exists in adult education, because the philosophy of adult education seeks adult learners' democratic and equal participation in a variety of learning settings. Facilitator of the online course needs to pay more attention to the international adult students who has English as second language in order to ensure their participation is acknowledged and reduce their marginality.

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